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Designer Air

A clean city looks a lot like L.A.'s growth around transit stations

by GLORIA OHLAND

It's ironic that Los Angeles, a city that's maligned as traffic-choked and strip-malled and pilloried as the poster city for smog and sprawl, is emerging as one of the country's premier laboratories for sustainable planning and design. Under the pressures of growth, traffic, and shifting demographics, the metropolis is undergoing a metamorphosis, becoming denser and reorganizing itself around its many centers and transportation corridors.

It's become clear that while new rail lines and a Prius in every garage are important parts of the solution to the air-quality problem in Southern California, an equally important strategy — and one that's much less expensive — is for the region to change the way it grows. Southern California needs to grow up like a city, not out into ever farther-flung suburbs. Most new development should be constructed in higher-density, multi-family lofts and condos — not single-family homes — primarily around rail stations and bus corridors.

Every three years local governments have to come up with a transportation plan and submit it to the federal government to prove the region will be in compliance with the Clean Air Act. If it's not, the federal government will yank billions of dollars in federal transportation funding and the region could have a serious funding jones (the feds provide more than half of all transportation funding). It's not an idle threat. In the '90s, after decades of unplanned growth and road-building in Atlanta — then said to have undergone the largest geographic expansion of any urban area in history — the federal government pulled funding, making national headlines. It was really, really bad PR, and it sent Atlanta's boomtown economy into a tailspin from which it's still not recovered.

To avoid a similar fate, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG is the agency responsible for coming up with this all-important transportation plan here) has had to get increasingly creative as development continues to push out toward Las Vegas and San Diego. Vast, verdant Riverside County, which is rapidly being diced into five-acre ranchettes, is the fastest-growing county in the fastest-growing state, and people continue to drive their Escalades and Navigators from here (most jobs are in L.A. and Orange counties) to there (while new housing is going up in both Riverside and San Bernardino counties).

The reason the air got cleaner over the past couple of decades had to do mostly with technological fixes — catalytic converters, cleaner fuel — but technology has taken the region about as far as it can go until scientists make the next leap to... Who knows? Hydrogen fuel? So the most recent transportation plan took a new tack: Here in Southern California, the place that practically invented sprawl, SCAG's 83-member Regional Council agreed upon what it calls the "2 Percent Strategy," which directs all new development and population growth (an estimated six million more people by 2030) onto just 2 percent of the land. This is less fantastic than it seems considering the six-county SCAG region comprises 38,000 square miles (L.A., Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside and Imperial counties).

In the past the region has been able to show conformity by investing huge sums in new highways and new rail lines to ease congestion. And indeed, this plan, too, would invest \$210 billion in rail and highways by 2030. But here's the kick: While 50 percent of emissions reductions needed for conformity with the Clean Air Act (and those federal dollars) will come from that \$210 billion investment, the other 50 percent of emissions reductions comes from encouraging development in existing city centers, around rail stations, and in transportation corridors. "While the transportation improvements cost billions of dollars," notes SCAG executive director Mark Pisano, "the emissions benefits that come from changing land use are free."

But there's even more bang for the buck, adds Pisano: Building higher-density housing near transit in existing communities can be expected to boost transit ridership by 30 percent (since that's where transit is located) and reduce housing costs by 25-30 percent (since higher-density housing is less expensive than

suburban single-family homes). “Given the dramatic need to increase both transit ridership and housing affordability, opposing this plan was hard to do,” says Pisano. Indeed, the Regional Council’s vote was unanimous.

This isn’t a pipe dream. Changing demographics in the region (and all across the U.S.) combined with traffic are completely revamping the American dream of a house in the suburbs with a two-car garage. Traffic is causing people to live in ever-smaller geographies — live, work and play close to home! — because unless you take the Rapid bus down Wilshire, a trip from Eastside to Westside or vice versa isn’t any fun anymore.

The shift in demographics is seismic. Married couples with kids — the demographic group that made up the majority of households not too long ago — now account for just 25 percent of the population, a percentage that will fall to 20 percent in a few years. Single adults — aging baby boomers and younger echo boomers — will soon be the new majority, and how many single adults want to live in a single-family home in the suburbs? Lofts, live-work spaces, condos and row houses in 24/7 urban neighborhoods with art and bars and arthouse film theaters are the housing type that’s preferred.

The real-estate market is changing dramatically.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, which annually surveys 500 developers, investors and real-estate industry leaders for its venerable “Emerging Trends in Real Estate” report, this year ranked locations near transit as the No. 1 choice for all development types – residential, commercial, office and retail. That’s why SCAG’s 2 Percent Strategy is supported not only by city officials but also by developers and the real-estate industry, and even the hugely influential (and generous with political contributions) Building Industry Association of Southern California, which includes all the big-time suburban-home builders like Kaufman and Broad.

“We’ve always wanted to build in urban neighborhoods but it’s been too hard,” confides Kirk Roloff of Archstone-Smith, a big national developer that just bought the still-under-construction Del Mar Station on the Gold Line in downtown Pasadena. “Now the market is making it worthwhile.” Adds Tony Salazar of another national development company, McCormack Baron Salazar, “Besides, in a place like L.A. there’s really nowhere else left to build.”

Planner John Fregonese from Portland, the consultant who helped SCAG move toward consensus on the 2 Percent Strategy, concurs. “In Denver or Dallas there’s still a choice of where to develop, but Southern California is the densest, most urbanized U.S. metropolis. Planners here may toy with the idea of Portland-style densities but the real model should be Manhattan or Chicago. The region is expected to add another six million residents by 2030 — the biggest growth spurt since the 1950s. Growth pressures here will continue to be inexorable and immutable.”

Not to worry. L.A. County alone has 500 miles of urban and commuter rail and more than 100 stations, and another 15 miles of urban rail and 15 stations in the pipeline. The rail network is supported by 2,300 buses and 18,500 bus stops, the number of Metro Rapid bus corridors is being expanded from 11 to 28 in three years, and L.A.’s first bus rapid-transit corridor, with 12 stations, opens this fall. This transit network — instead of the sprawl-inducing emission-producing network of roads — can become the armature for more compact growth patterns that make it possible to walk, bike and take transit instead of drive everywhere — and to breathe cleaner air.